

## WRITING CENTERS IN ATHLETICS, A NEW CONTACT ZONE

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When I meet someone for the first time and explain what I do, I commonly hear some version of the question “So, what? You write papers for football players?” It was in the spirit of combating this disheartening and marginalizing view of student athletes and athletics support services that I wrote my initial *Praxis* column, “Supporting Student Athletes.” There, I describe the Writing Lab (Lab) at The University of Texas at Austin’s (UT’s) Football Academics Center and our approach to working with student athlete football players. In beginning this conversation, my intent was to disavow notions that our writing tutors are doing more than they should for our student athletes and highlight writing center work happening in unconventional environments.

In his response to my column, J. Michael Rifenburg advocates for “greater awareness of how student-athletes are a unique subset of our student population.” I support increased scholarship on student athletes and writing, of course, and I absolutely agree that we, as writing center practitioners, must continually examine how we can adapt to student athletes’ unique circumstances.<sup>1</sup> As Rifenburg suggests, we must develop strategies that promote a “clearer understanding of the cognitive processes” associated with sports that may be applicable to writing<sup>2</sup> and demonstrate how “student-athletes operate within a complex discursive community.”

In calling for more research centered on student athletes, Rifenburg describes the strategies I suggest as being “strikingly similar to strategies the typical campus writing center would espouse.” Writing centers have supported student writing for decades, and I believe this expertise can prove invaluable in supporting student athlete success. Rifenburg argues, however, that NCAA guidelines impinge upon athletics academics centers to such a degree that “tutoring methods cannot mimic what occurs in a traditional campus writing center.”

Rifenburg refers to “strict NCAA academic compliance mandates, which, for example, disallow a tutor writing on a student-athlete’s paper or collaboratively brainstorming.” Neither a prohibition on writing on a student’s paper nor on collaboration appears in the *2012-2013 NCAA Division 1 Manual*.

The NCAA only addresses the broader issue of “unethical conduct,” in Bylaw 10.1, which includes academic fraud: “Knowing involvement in arranging for fraudulent academic credit or false transcripts for a prospective or an enrolled student-athlete” (10.1-(b)). The “2000 Official Interpretation” of Bylaw 10.1-(b) clarifies reporting requirements but does not include these prohibitions.<sup>3</sup>

Rifenburg also asserts that NCAA guidelines foster an environment in which athletics writing support “cannot tolerate tutor error” or “chaos.”<sup>4</sup> He identifies logistical requirements that impede chaos—tutors working in designated spaces, students signing in for writing sessions, and administrators observing tutoring sessions. Such requirements, common in many workplaces and writing centers, are not NCAA-specific and do not necessarily prevent creativity in sessions.

Adopting a writing center approach that embraces collaboration and chaos during writing sessions does not violate NCAA guidelines. The NCAA recently amended Bylaw 16.3.1.1, which describes academic services. Effective August 2013, the bylaw will read:

Member institutions shall make general academic counseling and tutoring services available to all student-athletes. Such counseling and tutoring services may be provided by the department of athletics or the institution's nonathletics student support services. In addition, an institution, conference or the NCAA may finance other academic support, career counseling or personal development services that support the success of student-athletes.

This amended bylaw eliminates specific limitations on support services and grants an institution greater latitude in implementing academic services to “support the success of student-athletes,” as long as they are in accordance with the institution’s academic integrity policies.

At UT, students, including student athletes, can visit the Undergraduate Writing Center (UWC) for their writing support needs. Since the UWC provides writing support services in keeping with our institution’s academic integrity policies,<sup>5</sup> our Lab should certainly be able to apply writing center practices and principles with student athletes to foster

their success. The extra benefit language I raise in my initial column supports this possibility. Bylaw 16.03.02 states that:

An extra benefit is any special arrangement by an institutional employee or a representative of the institution's athletics interests to provide a student-athlete or the student-athlete's relative or friend a benefit *not expressly authorized by NCAA legislation*. Receipt of a benefit by student-athletes or their relatives or friends is not a violation of NCAA legislation if it is demonstrated that the same benefit is generally available to the institution's students or their relatives or friends or to a particular segment of the student body (e.g., foreign students, minority students) determined on a basis unrelated to athletics ability. (emphasis added)

Bylaw 16.01.1 reinforces that an extra benefit is one “not authorized by NCAA legislation.” Tutoring services, as indicated in Bylaw 16.3.1.1, are authorized, so they do not constitute an “extra benefit.” But in calling attention to services that are “generally available” to non-athlete students, Bylaw 16.03.02 provides some context for using the writing center as a basis for thinking about writing support services in athletics.

Writing center work is collaborative by nature—tutors engage students in conversations that promote reflection, learning, and writing development. So, if we use the writing center as a model for our Lab, then collaboration will be a key component of our writing sessions with student athletes. Productive moments of chaos can and do occur in writing sessions with student athletes as part of this collaboration. Students have different personalities and ways of learning and must respond to diverse types of assignments in various disciplines. Because tutors do not follow a script, some chaos is inevitable, and often beneficial, in writing sessions; it is only fitting that tutors tailor their pedagogical strategies to each session.

While tutors writing on papers and collaborating with students are not actions verboten by the NCAA, institutions should nevertheless develop best practices to reduce the heightened risk associated with tutoring student athletes. To that end, as writing program administrators in athletics, we should create tutor handbooks and writing policies in keeping with both NCAA guidelines and our institutions’ academic integrity policies. For example, to help ensure student ownership of and responsibility during the writing process, our Lab adheres to even stricter policies than some writing centers with regard to feedback—our tutors will only give feedback in person, not electronically.

We must also manage expectations of writing tutors and writing sessions and provide ongoing tutor education, prompting tutors to be mindful of their role in students’ learning and writing. In our Lab, I meet weekly with our tutors to discuss writing center literature and theories and reflect on their applicability to our particular tutoring environment. Tutors talk about writing sessions they have had with students and share strategies they have used.

Moreover, we must communicate with athletics compliance professionals on campus when developing best practices. Our Lab does this every semester when a representative meets with our tutors to review pertinent guidelines and discuss cases involving academic integrity violations. Maintaining open communication with our compliance office helps ensure that we are familiar with and understand how NCAA guidelines impact tutors’ work at the Lab. And it gives tutors an opportunity to share what work in our Lab looks like on a daily basis and demonstrate how writing center methods can support student athletes’ learning.

Rifenburg and I agree on the need for “qualitative research into...how best to tutor” student athletes. An advantage of working in athletics is the ability to work with the same students throughout the semester, enabling tutors to build rapport with students and get to know their writing, find effective ways to motivate students toward success, and help students create plans of action for improving their writing over the semester.<sup>6</sup> We should look for ways to leverage this advantage in service to research. Yet student athletes have special obligations, such as workouts, practices, and treatments, which limit the amount of time they can spend on academics. Even though we see our students often at the Football Academics Center, they must divide their time during study hall among their academic obligations. So, at our Lab, we allow variable writing session lengths, and we permit students to step away to work on other assignments while a tutor reads their writing and return once the tutor has finished reading to discuss feedback.

I am thrilled to contribute to this ongoing conversation regarding student athlete writing. I believe that writing center work, with its combination of order and chaos, art and artisanship,<sup>7</sup> or mundane versus trickster moments,<sup>8</sup> does not present a problem within athletics. Rather, it is an opportunity to generate best practices for working with student athletes on writing—practices that build on NCAA guidelines to support, effectively and ethically, a student population deserving of greater acknowledgement in academic discourses.

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Notes

1. At last year's IWCA Conference, Tom Philipose at St. John's University and I collaborated on a panel entitled "Creating a Winning Team: Writing Centers, Instructors, and Student-Athlete Writers" in which we discuss writing centers that work with student athletes. See also: Broussard, William. "Collaborative Work, Competitive Students, Counter-Narrative: A Tale from Out of (the Academy's) Bounds." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 28.1 (2003): 1-5. Print.; Broussard, William and Nahal Rodieck. "One for the Gipper (and One for the Tutor): On Writing Center Tutorials with College Student-Athletes." *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 28.7 (2004): 1-5. Print.
2. See: Cheville, Julie. *Minding the Body: What Student Athletes Know About Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 2001. Print.; Kent, Richard. *Writing on the Bus: Using Athletic Team Notebooks and Journals to Advance Learning and Performance in Sports*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2012. Print.
3. I want to thank Blake Barlow, Director-Risk Management and Compliance Services at UT's Athletics Department, for lending his insight into the NCAA and Bylaws I discuss in this column.
4. Rifenburg references: Boquet, Elizabeth. *Noise from the Writing Center*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2002. Print.; Boquet, Elizabeth and Michele Eodice. "Creativity in the Writing Center: A Terrifying Conundrum." *Creative Approaches to Writing Center Work*. Eds. Kevin Dvorak and Shanti Bruce. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008: 3-20. Print.
5. For more information on UT's academic integrity policies, visit: "Academic Integrity." *The Office of the Dean of Students*. 15 Aug. 2012. The University of Texas at Austin. Web. 24 Feb. 2013.
6. See: Thompson, Isabelle. "Scaffolding in the Writing Center: A Microanalysis of an Experienced Tutor's Verbal and Nonverbal Tutoring Strategies." *Written Communication* 26.4 (2009): 417-485. Print. Thompson examines "motivational" strategies and "ongoing diagnosis" in student writing development, which are important in working with student athletes.
7. Sherwood, Steve. "Portrait of the Tutor as an Artist: Lessons No One Can Teach." *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors*. Eds. Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001: 97-111. Print.
8. Geller, et al. "Trickster at Your Table." *Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007: 15-31. Print.